



LECTURE #10:
NATURE AND MIRACLES
Rabbi Eli Hadad

In our previous lecture, we emphasized the significance of Maimonides's decision to prefer the proposition that the world was created to the idea that it has existed from eternity. Maimonides marks the possibility of miracles as one of the important derivatives of this position, and we added in clarification that its primary significance lies in the recognition that God relates to the world, and not only to knowing Himself.

Maimonides's stand on miracles is also quite complex. On the one hand, Maimonides resolutely embraces the idea that "the world follows its normal course." That is to say, the world operates according to the fixed laws of nature that are constant and unchanging. On the other hand, he regards the possibility of miracles, which constitute a deviation from the world's natural order, as a necessary corollary of the principles of the Torah. How is it possible to reconcile these two assertions?

"THE WORLD FOLLOWS ITS NORMAL COURSE"

Maimonides writes in *Hilkhot Melakhim* (12:1) that in the days of the Messiah the world will continue to operate according to the laws of nature without change.

Let no one think that in the days of the Messiah any of the laws of nature will be set aside, or any innovation will be introduced into creation. The world will follow its normal course.

Maimonides's opening words "Let no one think" (*al ya'aleh al ha-lev*) indicate that he is engaging here in polemics. Maimonides was certainly familiar with other opinions current in the Jewish world, according to which the Messianic period will usher in changes in the natural order, and he emphatically comes out against these views. Rabad (Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres), who criticizes Maimonides on this point, was also counted among those who advocated the opposite view. Regarding the Messianic king as well, Maimonides opens

in a similar fashion: "**Do not think** (*ve-al ya'aleh al da'atkha*) that King Messiah will have to perform signs and wonders, bring anything new into being, revive the dead, or do similar things." And he immediately follows with the unequivocal assertion: "It is not so."

This assertion leads Maimonides to reinterpret the words of the prophets and understand them figuratively, wherever, according to their plain sense, they seem to imply that the laws of nature will change. Thus, he continues:

The words of Isaiah, "And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid" (Isaiah 11:6) are to be understood figuratively, meaning that Israel will live securely among the wicked of the heathens who are likened to wolves and leopards, as it is written: "A wolf of the desert spoils them, a leopard watches over their cities" (Jeremiah 5:6). They will all accept the true religion, and will neither plunder nor destroy, and together with Israel earn a comfortable living in a legitimate way, as it is written: "And the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 11:7). All similar expressions used in connection with the Messianic age are metaphorical. In the days of King Messiah the full meaning of those metaphors and their allusions will become clear to all.¹

THE WORLD-TO-COME

Maimonides continues this exegetical approach in his *Guide* (II, 29), where he deals with the prophetic passages that appear to imply that the world will be destroyed. Maimonides rejects these understandings and proposes figurative interpretations of the passages in question. Regarding this issue as well, Maimonides was well acquainted with other opinions. He was certainly familiar with the view of Rabbenu Sa'adiah Gaon in the final chapters of his book "*Emunot ve-De'ot*," where he describes the changes that will occur in this world, to the point that the world will be entirely different, "this world" turning into the "world-to-come." That is to say, it will change into a world whose natural laws are totally different from those with which we are presently familiar.

¹ See Rabad's stricture, *ad loc.*: "Surely the Torah states: 'And I will remove evil beasts out of the land' (Leviticus 26:6)." He seems to be of the opinion that the Torah's words may not be interpreted metaphorically. We have already seen, however, that Maimonides certainly disagrees with this proposition, and that he interprets many biblical passages not in accordance with their plain sense.

Maimonides absolutely rejects this position. He argues that the "world-to-come" is not a world that will "**come after**" this world, but rather the world of the disembodied souls who will merit eternal life after death. The world-to-come is a world that **parallels** the existing world known to us. Maimonides was certainly familiar with the alternative understanding, and so he concludes his discussion of the topic (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 8:8) with an explanation of the literal meaning of the expression "world-to-come." Here too he adopts a polemical approach, negating the opposing view:

The reason why the Sages styled it "the world-to-come" is **not because** it is not now in existence and will only come into being when this world shall have passed away. **It is not so.** The world-to-come now exists, as it is stated: "Which You have treasured up for them that fear You, which You have wrought [for them that trust in You before the children of men]" (Psalms 31:19-20). It is called the world-to-come, only because human beings will enter into it at a time subsequent to the life of the present world in which we now exist with body and soul, and this existence comes first.

Here too Rabad expresses his disagreement, forcefully chiding Maimonides for his opinion: "It seems that he denies that the world will return to chaos and nothingness, and that the Holy One, blessed be He, will create His world anew." Rabad adduces support for his position from a talmudic passage in *Rosh ha-Shanah* (31a): "And [the Sages] have said: 'The world lasts six thousand years, and one thousand years it is waste.' Thus, there will be a new world."

Maimonides did not respond directly to Rabad's stricture, but in the *Guide* II, 29 he connects the two issues, restating his opposition both to the idea that our world will be destroyed as well as to the notion that it will deviate from its normal course:

The notion toward which we are driving has already been made clear; namely, that the **passing-away** of this world, a **change** of the state in which it is, or a thing's changing its nature and with that the permanence of this change, are not affirmed in any prophetic text or in any statement of the Sages either.

Maimonides also relates to Rabad's proof-text from the Gemara in *Rosh ha-Shanah*. Pressed into a corner, he argues that the view stated there is a lone dissenting opinion.

For when the latter say: "The world lasts six thousand years, and one thousand years it is waste," they do not have in mind total extinction of being. For his expression, "and one thousand years it is a waste," indicates that time remains. Besides, it is the saying of an individual that corresponds to a certain manner of thinking.

We see then that Maimonides, in a complex exegetical move, totally rejects two opinions that were current among the Jewish people, and boldly asserts that our world will not be destroyed and that the natural order will not change. What lies behind these two assertions?

THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

In several places in his writings, Maimonides identifies the book of Ecclesiastes as the foundation of his thought. In the *Guide* II, 29, he adds that the book of Ecclesiastes is the basis of the position of all the Sages (with the exception of that sole dissenting opinion cited earlier).

On the other hand, you **constantly** find as the opinion of **all** Sages and as a foundation on which every one among the Sages of the Mishnah and the Sages of the Talmud bases his proofs, his saying: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9), and the view that nothing new will be produced in any respect or from any cause whatever.

In the *Guide* II, 28, Maimonides explains this position, as well as his reliance on the words of Ecclesiastes:

For he says: "That whatsoever God does, it shall be **for ever**; nothing can be added to it, nor any thing taken from it" (Ecclesiastes 3:14). Thus he imparts in this verse the information that the world is a work of the deity and that it is eternal. He also states the cause of its being eternal; namely in his words: "Nothing can be added to it, nor any thing taken from it." For this is the cause of its being for ever. It is as if he said that the thing that is changed, is changed because of a deficiency in it that should be made good or because of some excess that is not needed and should be got rid of. Now the works of the deity are most perfect, and with regard to them there is no possibility of an excess or a

deficiency. Accordingly they are of necessity permanently established as they are, for there is no possibility of something calling for a change in them.

Maimonides explains his position, basing it on the argument that this world is perfect, or more precisely, the most perfect world possible. This argument is based upon two assumptions:

- 1) The works of God are most perfect.
- 2) Our world is the work of God.

From this it follows:

- 3) Our world is the most perfect world possible.

To this we must add another assumption:

- 4) Any change in something that is perfect necessarily detracts from its perfection.

Two conclusions follow from this:

- 5) The natural order will never change, because this is the most perfect state of the world.
- 6) There will never be another world, for this world is the most perfect.

Maimonides's conclusions regarding the permanence of the laws of nature and of this world result from his basic perception of this world as the most perfect world, it being the work of God.² From this follows also his conclusion regarding the world-to-come. That is to say, the world-to-come will not be created after this world within history and in the framework of existence within time. Rather, it is an eternal world that exists parallel to this world. It seems that Maimonides was the first to appreciate the depth of this understanding of

² Maimonides uses the same argument to support his position that there will be no other Torah. That is to say, the Torah that God gave to Moses is the most perfect Torah possible, so that nothing may be added or detracted from it, and no other Torah can come in its place. The terms "to add and detract" appear both with respect to the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy and with respect to the world in the book of Ecclesiastes.

the world-to-come and fashion it as the basic outlook of the Jewish world, though we do find hints to this view among some of his predecessors.

THE NATURE OF THIS WORLD

Are miracles possible in this world?

First of all, it should be noted that Maimonides faced various claims regarding the nature of the world. While he resolutely asserts that the world is nature, that is, a fixed and unchanging natural order, there were Arab theologians who claimed that the world is a continuous expression of God's will. This means that the constancy of the world evident to our eye does not result from natural laws implanted in the universe. Rather, God continuously invokes His will and in every instant creates the world anew, though we perceive it as constant.

Already in his *Commentary to the Mishnah* (introduction to *Avot*, chapter 8), Maimonides refers to this group of theologians, the Mutakallimun, known in Hebrew as the *Medabberim* ("Speakers"). He rejects their view, relying here as well on verses from the book of Ecclesiastes.

On this matter, the *Medabberim* disagree. For I heard them say that **the [Divine] will expresses itself in everything, in every instant, continuously.** We, however, do not believe this. Rather, the [Divine] will expressed itself during the six days of creation, and all things follow always from their nature, as it is stated: "That which has been, it is that which shall be" (*Ecclesiastes* 1:9); "that which is, already has been" (*ibid.* 3:15); "there is nothing new under the sun" (*ibid.* 1:9).

According to Maimonides, will can be attributed to God only at the moment of creation, but not over the course of the existence of the world. As opposed to the view of the *Medabberim* that the will of God continuously operates in the world, Maimonides maintains that God's will expressed itself only at the moment³ of its creation. From the time that the world was created, the world operates in accordance with a fixed natural order.

³ The word *regā*, "moment," is used here in a borrowed sense, for, according to Maimonides, "the moment" of the world's creation was the beginning of time, so that "before" the world was created, there was no time. Rather, the expressions "before creation" and "the moment of creation" are borrowed expressions necessitated by the inadequacy of human language.

It turns out then that Maimonides adopts the middle path between Aristotle and the *Medabberim*. Aristotle maintained that the natural order of the world is a necessary derivative of God's wisdom. God's wisdom is reflected in the world's order, and therefore the world had no beginning. Rather, it is eternal, like God Himself. The *Medabberim*, on the other hand, maintain that the world is created every instant anew. Each and every moment, God's will brings the world into existence, so that in truth there is no order in the world, but only an illusion of continuous order. We can, therefore, say that while according to Aristotle, the world results from **God's wisdom**, according to the *Medabberim*, it results from **His will**.

Maimonides adopts an independent position. When it first came into being, the world was the result of God's will; this is the meaning of creation as opposed to eternity. But from the moment that it was created, the world has operated in accordance with natural law. In this respect, Maimonides accepts the view of the *Medabberim* regarding the moment of creation, but the view of Aristotle regarding the nature of the world.

We have already noted that Aristotle leaves no room for miracles. Since the world's order is a necessary and eternal derivative of God's wisdom, never were there or will there be miracles in the world. In contrast, according to the *Medabberim*, the world is in effect an expression of hidden miracles transpiring at every moment. How are miracles possible according to Maimonides? How are miracles possible despite the world's natural order and regularity?

MIRACLES AS PART OF NATURE

Later in the eighth chapter of his introduction to *Avot*, Maimonides writes:

For this reason **the Sages** were forced to say that all the miracles that deviate from the normal course of the world, in the past and promised for the future, **were all determined by the [Divine] will in the six days of creation**. It was then stamped upon the nature of those things that something new would be produced. And when that something new was produced at the appropriate time, they thought that it was something happening at that time, but this is not so. They have already spoken about this at great length in *Midrash Kohelet* and other places. They said about this: "The world follows its normal course." You will find in all their words, peace be upon them, that they always flee attributing [Divine] will to all things in every instant.

To resolve this difficulty, Maimonides presents the position of the Sages that all miracles were predetermined at the time of creation. That is to say, at the time of creation the Divine will established the natural laws as well as the deviations from those laws. Thus, it follows that there is no willful Divine intervention over the course of the existence of the world. Here Maimonides implies that he identifies with this position, but in the *Guide* II, 29, the matter is more complicated.

There Maimonides first presents **his own position**:

I have said that a thing does not change its nature in such a way that the change is permanent merely in order to be cautious with regard to the miracles. For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, and the pure and noble hand became white without a natural cause that necessitated this, these and similar things **were not permanent and did not become another nature**. But as they, may their memory be blessed, say: "The world goes its natural way." **This is my opinion**, and this is what ought to be believed.

According to this position, changes in the natural order are possible, though they are not permanent, but only of limited duration. That is to say, a miracle is possible provided that it will persist for only a set time. We shall discuss this position below, but let us first deal with the view of the Sages that Maimonides cites after presenting his own position:

The Sages, may their memory be blessed, have made **a very strange statement** about miracles, the text of which you will find in *Bereishit Rabbah* and in *Midrash Kohelet*. This notion consists in their holding the view that miracles too are something that is, in a certain respect, in nature. They say that when God created that which exists and stamped upon it the existing natures, He put it into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred. According to this opinion, the sign of a prophet consists in God's making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation, and thereupon a certain thing is effected according to what was put into its nature when first it received its particular impress.

If this statement is as you will see it, **it indicates the superiority of the man who made it** and the fact that he found it extremely difficult to admit that nature may change after the work of creation or that another volition may supervene after that nature has been established in a definite way. For instance, he seems to

consider that it was put into the nature of water to be continuous and always to flow from above downwards except at the time of the drowning of the Egyptians; it was a particularity of that water to become divided. I have drawn your attention to the spirit of that passage and to the fact that all this serves to avoid having to admit the coming-into-being of something new.

It is said in the passage (*Bereishit Rabbah* 5): "Rabbi Yonatan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, has posed conditions to the sea: that it should divide before Israel. That is [the meaning of the words]: "And the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared" (Exodus 14:27). Rabbi Yirmiyah son of Eleazar said: The Holy One, blessed be He, has posed conditions not only to the sea, but to all that has been created in the six days of creation. That is [the meaning of the words]: "I, even My hands have stretched out the heavens and all their hosts have I commanded" (Isaiah 45:12). I have commanded the sea to divide; the fire not to harm Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; the lions not to harm Daniel; and the fish to spit out Jonah. All the other miracles can be explained in an analogous manner.

Maimonides cites this position **at length**, its essence being that the miracles were predetermined at the time of creation. He adds that a miracle is not a change in the natural order, but rather God informs the prophet when the predetermined deviation will occur.

On the one hand, Maimonides calls these words of the Sages "very strange." On the other hand, he asserts that the statement "indicates the superiority of the man who made it." The explanation offered for this praise is that those who advocated this position wished to avoid admitting the possibility of changes in the natural order after the world was created. This seems to imply that Maimonides identified with this view. But he fails to explain what is "strange" about this opinion. Apparently, he believes that asserting that deviations from the natural order are part of that order is a contradiction in terms. Natural order implies constancy without exceptions; miracles constitute deviations from the natural order. If a natural order was established at the time of creation, deviations from that order could not have been established within it.

A reasonable resolution of this contradiction is that the deviations are not real; they merely appear as deviations to those who are not fully familiar with the natural order. According to this approach, a prophet who is forewarned about when a predetermined deviation will occur is in effect being informed about the natural order in its entirety. Some Maimonides scholars maintain that Maimonides identified with this position, even though he

dismisses it as "strange," and even though he explicitly states that his own opinion is different.⁴

A MIRACLE AS A TEMPORARY DEVIATION

As we noted at the beginning of our discussion, Maimonides himself rejects this position, proclaiming that he accepts changes in the natural order that are of limited duration. The reasoning behind this argument is implicit in his words. If a miracle is permanent, so that from now on the world will operate in accordance with it, it will turn into "another nature," that is, a different natural order. A change of this sort is impossible, for it violates one of Maimonides's fundamental arguments that the world as it is, with its natural order, is the most perfect world possible. A permanent change in the world's natural order creates a new world that disqualifies the old world, and this is impossible.

Does a temporary change impair the claim regarding the world's perfection? We noted earlier that our world is "the most perfect" world, the most perfect world possible, but this does not mean that the world has no flaws. Maimonides notes that in the material world things do not operate in perfect order. Matter, owing to its very nature, does not allow the natural order to reach perfect expression in this material world. In other words, even the most perfect world possible is not a perfectly flawless world. It is a world with the least possible number of imperfections, but nevertheless it is not absolutely perfect.

It seems, therefore, that, owing to its imperfections, the world requires certain interventions. A great number of interventions would testify to an essential flaw in the world, but a small number of interventions turns the world into a better place than a world without any interventions whatsoever. We may, therefore, say that Maimonides severely limits the phenomenon of miracles, but insists on their possibility. It follows then that even in the orderly world of Maimonides, there are exceptional cases in which the Divine will intervenes.

This is the way that Maimonides summarizes his position in the *Guide* II, 29:

The matter has now become clear to you and the doctrine epitomized. Namely, we agree with Aristotle with regard to one half of his opinion and we believe that what exists is eternal a parte poste and will last forever with that nature which

⁴ See, for example, Ya'akov Levinger, "Ha-Rambam ke-Filosof u-khe-Hogeh," Jerusalem 5750, p. 156, note 8.

He, may He be exalted, has willed; that nothing in it will be changed in any respect **unless it be in some particular of it miraculously** – although He, may He be exalted, has the power to change the whole of it, or to annihilate it, or to annihilate any nature in it that He wills. However, that which exists has had a beginning, and at first nothing at all existed except God. **His wisdom** required that He should bring creation into existence at the time when He did do it, and that what He has brought into existence should not be annihilated nor any of its natures changed except in certain particulars that He **willed** to change; about some of these we know, whereas about others that will be changed in the future we do not know. This is our opinion and the basis of our Law. Aristotle, on the other hand, thinks that just as the world is eternal a parte post and will not pass away, it is also eternal a parte ante and has not been produced. Now we have already said and explained that this doctrine can be arranged in a coherent way only through a recourse to the law of necessity and that necessity contains a presumptuous assertion with regard to the deity, as we have explained.

Aristotle maintained that the world is eternal, with no beginning and no end. Some of the Sages of Israel were of the opinion that the world had a beginning and will have an end. Maimonides thinks that that it had a beginning, but that it has no end. So too he believes that the world's natural order is permanent, in accordance with the principle that the world follows its natural course. Within that order, however, miracles that deviate from the natural order are possible for a limited period of time. Thus, it has been established that the world is founded on Divine wisdom, but despite the natural order the revelation of Divine will is possible. On a deeper level, this deviation does not contradict the natural order, but rather is in accord with it, for the world thereby becomes "the best possible world," as befits the work of God.